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24 March
1980

Expert sees a revival of urban church and the city

Chester Smolski

Douglas Walrath, recognized church consultant and author, was at the Epworth United Methodist Church in Pawtucket to address a recent conference of the Urban Ministry Division of the Rhode Island State Council of Churches on the topic of urban churches. At the end of the day, the more than 100 who attended from throughout the Providence metropolitan area left the meeting considerably more optimistic about the future of their churches and of the urban centers in which they are located.

Walrath came to tell how urban churches could become more viable and generate stronger links in the community. In the process, he spoke about the recovery of the city and how this new force would affect city churches. It was a message of hope for the future of the city and city churches, but more than hope, it was a recognition of hard-nosed facts and trends that will impact in a positive manner on our cities.

The revival of the city, already started, will escalate in the '80s, and this decade will be considerably better for the city, Walrath believes, than have been the last two. He bases his prediction on seven economic and social indicators.

Public and private cooperation is a new factor in city revitalization. Recognizing that shared efforts can have a marked impact on city development and rebirth, private business firms are now working closely with local governments to bring about revived economic development, provide expertise to government ventures, run programs in conjunction with the city and design a host of other measures for city redevelopment. The proposed railroad relocation for downtown Providence well illustrates this cooperation between business and government in bringing about economic revival.

A second favorable indicator is the formation of new families, with the baby-boom populace reaching into the 25-to-34-year age group expected to increase

Young people look for opportunity, excitement in the cities, not suburbs

by nine million in this next decade. These young people, as they start their married lives, will create an inordinate demand for housing, much of it in the cities.

This leads to the third indicator that Walrath emphasized, the surprisingly good housing stock found in most cities. Sometimes in need of rehabilitation but fundamentally sound, these houses are considerably less expensive than those found outside of cities.

Another social indicator that will have a positive effect on the city is the rising divorce rate. The increasing number of single and divorced persons will be looking for places to live, and the city, with its variety of housing opportunities, will be the logical place to find such housing. Divorce among those in the 40- and 50-year age groups will bring back from the suburbs persons of proven leadership who, in turn, can direct this quality to roles in the churches and the city.

There is a decided value shift in the attitude that people, especially the young, have toward living in the city. City life, with its cultural and economic opportunities and variety of experiences, and a general dissatisfaction with suburban life have turned former negative feelings toward the city into a recognition of its positive features. Having been raised in the security of the suburbs, the young, as in former times, are moving to cities to accept the challenges and seek the opportunities that they find lacking in their bedroom communities.

The completion of the interstate highway system means that further suburbanization drains on the city will be lessened. The completed highways will now make access into the city easier and, in turn, to churches as well.

Last, and perhaps most significant is economic scarcity. Heralded in 1973-74 by the Arab oil embargo, a watershed period that Walrath feels will make this an "Age of Limits," rising energy costs will affect such areas as housing and transportation. The result will be to benefit the city, where public transportation is available and where goods and services are clustered to be more readily available. A resultant decline in mobility will bring greater investments into neighborhoods that will lead to greater stability, with less crime and social disorganization.

Although the message brought by the New York consultant was directed to urban churches, his words are just as valid when applied to our urban centers. There is strong evidence, based on such social and economic indicators, that points to a revival of the city. More and more, different experts see the future of the city in a positive perspective. Will the decade of the '80s be the time of city rebirth? Considered from the views of this churchman, the answer is a definite yes.

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